

DECISION MEMO



Cleanup of Hurricane Ivan Damage in Compartments 19, 20, and 22



USDA, Forest Service
Conecuh National Forest - National Forests in Alabama
Covington County, Alabama

Background

Hurricane Ivan blew down, snapped off, and damaged trees across the Conecuh National Forest on September 16, 2004. Areas affected by Hurricane Ivan were identified from aerial reconnaissance and then field checked on the ground. Damaged areas were evaluated and prioritized based on amount of damage. Although much of the concentrated damage occurred on the western and southern portions of the Conecuh, areas in Compartments 19, 20, and 22 were also damaged. These compartments are within the Blue Spring Wildlife Management Area and the Conecuh Trail passes through this area. Much of the damage in this area is along or near the trail and nearby roads.

Higher amounts of damaged pine trees in uplands increase hazardous fuel loading, residual smoke concerns following prescribed burning, and insect threats (reference Fuels and Forest Health reports in the project file). Public and worker safety is also a concern due to damaged and leaning trees within the Conecuh Trail and roads within the Blue Spring Wildlife Management Area where there is a great deal of public use. As a result, this project was developed to facilitate removal of damaged trees in the vicinity of the Conecuh Trail and nearby roads.

Decision

I have decided to remove pine trees damaged by Hurricane Ivan on approximately 170 acres within Compartments 19, 20, and 22 (reference attached map). This action is being taken to reduce hazardous fuel loading, reduce smoke concerns associated with prescribed burns, decrease insect threats, and provide safer conditions for forest visitors and workers in the general vicinity of the Conecuh Trail.

Across the forest, many other areas were impacted by Hurricane Ivan (about 8,000 acres of damaged trees are proposed for treatment in a separate environmental assessment). However, based upon my professional experience, the actions within this decision need to proceed as soon as possible. Timing is critical, not only for safety concerns due to this being a higher public use area, but also to provide for better resource protection concerning the Conecuh Trail itself. Similar actions taken following Hurricane Opal in the winter of 1995-96 resulted in some rutting of the trail during a wet weather period. It is my desire to expedite implementation of this project in hopes of avoiding conditions and circumstances similar to those following Hurricane Opal. If implementation can occur before the winter rainy season begins, much more favorable conditions should exist so that management activities can be completed with little to no damage to the trail bed. Therefore, this project is limited in scale for the immediate protection of forest visitors and recreational resources associated within the general vicinity of the Conecuh Trail.

Implementation of this project is to comply with the standards and guidelines of the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama (2004). In addition, the following measures will be implemented:

- No logging equipment will be allowed on the trail except at crossings designated by the Forest Service.
- When it can be done in a safe manner, damaged trees located nearby should be directionally felled away from the trail.
- Stump heights of trees cut immediately adjacent to the trail should be 6 inches or less.
- Lop and scatter logging slash within two feet of the ground in the immediate foreground view of the trail unless this slash reduction would not significantly reduce the chaotic look of the hurricane-ravaged forest.
- Remove root bundles in the immediate foreground view of the trail unless root wad elimination would not significantly reduce the chaotic look of the hurricane-ravaged forest.
- Locate landings out of sight of the trail (once equipment is removed).
- If negatively affected by logging activity, repair and restore the Conecuh Trail as soon as logging operations in any affected areas have been completed.
- Apply brown/black paint to cover the orange boundary paint easily visible from the Conecuh Trail as soon as the timber sale contract is completed and the sale is closed.
- Favor flowering and other visually attractive trees when leaving vegetation.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an EIS or EA because it is consistent with the following categories from Forest Service Handbook 1909.15-2004-3, dated 07/06/2004:

Section 31.12 (4) – Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landlines boundaries.

- The treatment area is along and in close proximity to the Conecuh Trail.
- Vegetation to be removed is hazardous to forest visitors using the trail.
- Actions provide for the overall maintenance of the Conecuh Trail, specifically in recovering from damage and removing hazards caused by Hurricane Ivan.

Section 31.2 (13) – Salvage of dead and/or dying trees not to exceed 250 acres.

- Actions will remove only those trees that were blown down, snapped off, and/or were otherwise damaged by Hurricane Ivan.
- No new road construction is necessary to carry out this action; existing roads will be used.
- Actions will reduce hazardous fuels and reduce smoke concerns following prescribed burning.

I find that this project is appropriate for categorical exclusion within these categories because no extraordinary circumstances exist as defined in FSH 1909.15, 30.3.2:

- It is my experience that past projects that are similar to the proposed action have had no significant effects on the quality of the human environment, directly, indirectly, or cumulatively.

- The Biological Evaluation determined this action will have “no effect” on any federally proposed or listed species and “no impact” to any Forest Service sensitive species.
- The proposed action is not in a floodplain, wetland, or municipal watershed.
- No part of this project area is congressionally designated as wilderness, wild and scenic river, or wilderness study area.
- No part of this project area is administratively designated as inventoried roadless or research natural area.
- The District Archaeologist determined that the project area does not contain any archaeological sites that are included in or potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Public Involvement

This proposal was developed with input from Covington and Escambia County officials, Alabama Game and Fish Division, Alabama Forestry Commission, US Fish and Wildlife Service, WildLaw, Longleaf Alliance, and the Gulf Coast Plain Ecosystem Partnership. A legal notice was published in the Andalusia Star-News on October 16, 2004 to solicit comments on the proposed action. No comments were received.

Findings Required by Other Laws

National Forest Management Act: This decision is consistent with the Forest Plan (Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama, 2004) as required by the National Forest Management Act. The project was designed in conformance with Forest Plan goals, objectives, and standards. Specifically, this project meets Forest Plan goals for reducing risks from insects and disease (Goal 3), providing a spectrum of high quality, nature-based recreation settings (Goal 22), and providing a wide variety of dispersed and developed recreation opportunities (Goal 23). Applicable Forest Plan standards are located in the project file.

Clean Water Act: The Forest Plan contains direction to ensure all projects comply with the requirements of the Clean Water Act. Therefore by following that direction, this project is in compliance with the Clean Water Act.

Endangered Species Act: The Forest Plan was developed with the benefit of extensive consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The USFWS concurred with the Forest Service's determination that the implementation of the Forest Plan is “not likely to adversely affect” federally-listed endangered or threatened species or their habitats.

The District Biologist has conducted a site-specific evaluation of the potential effects of this project regarding federally-listed endangered or threatened species or their habitats, and sensitive species or their habitats. The Biological Evaluation documents this action will have “no effect” on endangered or threatened species or their habitats and “no impact” to sensitive species or their habitats.

The District is in compliance with the Alternative Consultation Agreement prepared pursuant to the Joint Counterpart Endangered Species Act, Section 7 Consultation Regulations issued on December 8, 2003 (Federal Register, pages 68254 - 68265).

National Historic Preservation Act: A Heritage Resources survey and inventory of the project area was conducted by the Conecuh District Archaeologist. Only one prehistoric isolated find was documented and was determined as not eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Appeal Rights

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 215.12 (f).

Implementation

Implementation of this decision may begin immediately and is expected to occur in November to December of this year.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision contact Debbie Russell, NEPA/GIS Coordinator, Conecuh National Forest, 16375 Highway 29, Andalusia, Alabama (telephone: 334-222-2555).

Gary L. Taylor

DISTRICT RANGER

10/29/04

DATE

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

